DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 811 TM 017 992

AUTHOR Elmore, Randy
TITLE Improving the Assessment of Georgia Students.
PUB DATE Dec 91
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Achievement Tests; Basic Skills; *Educational Assessment; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Problem Solving; Scores; Standardized Tests; State Legislation; *State Programs; *Student Evaluation; *Testing Problems; Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS Alternatives to Standardized Testing; Authentic Assessment; *Georgia; *Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

Shortcomings in the current student assessment program in Georgia are identified, proposed revisions are described, and additional changes are recommended. Georgia educators have complained that curricula place too much emphasis on basic skills, to the detriment of subjects like science and social studies. Reform legislation in Georgia has increased the stakes in testing, putting teachers and administrators under great pressure to demonstrate high student scores. The Georgia Assessment Program will be changed to give fewer, but more difficult, tests; to test four grades instead of nine; and to measure science, social studies, health, and writing in addition to reading and mathematics. Advanced problem-solving tasks will be measured along with fundamental tasks. The largest problem with the assessment program is its use as a method to hold local educators accountable, a circumstance that can result in teaching to the test. If student assessment in Georgia is to improve, state leadership must encourage the development of authentic assessments to use along with standardized measures. Professional development is also needed to increase teachers' understanding of measurement techniques. Both educators and citizens need to understand more effective ways to evaluate student performance in Georgia schools. A 10-item list of references is included. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

TM

IMPROVING THE ASSESSMENT OF GEORGIA STUDENTS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

RANDY F. ELMORE

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED342811

Dr. Randy Elmore

Curriculum and Instruction Department

Kennesaw State College

Marietta, Georgia

December, 1991

TM017992

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

IMPROVING THE ASSESSMENT OF GEORGIA STUDENTS

Georgia Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Werner Rogers, and Director of Assessment, Dr. Stan Bernknopf, indicate that the current student assessment program is being revised (Atlanta Journal, 1991). Revisions are being made because the assessment program resulted in test-driven curricula across the state. Important changes are proposed for the assessment program but some needed reforms are not in the plans. This article will examine shortcomings in the current testing program, describe proposed revisions, and recommend additional changes.

Georgia educators complained in the past that curricula in local schools placed too much emphasis on basic skills. To a large extent, they blamed the Georgia Criterion Referenced Tests (CRT's) for the problem. To prepare for the tests, much time was spent on reading and mathematics, subjects for which the tests were designed. Less time was spent on other subjects like science and social studies. The Quality Basic Education (QBE) law, Georgia's reform legislation, which requires the publication of school and district performance on standardized tests, put a lot of pressure on local administrators and teachers to have high scores (Quality Basic Education Act, 1985, p.70). Under such conditions, educators complained that much class time was spent teaching for the tests. Some teachers in the state felt their jobs depended on the standardized scores of their students, regardless of the background and abilities of the pupils (Livingston, Castle & Nations, 1989). The stakes were raised

even higher when state rules required that pupils in kindergarten and grade three be promoted or retained on the basis of CRT scores. George Madaus (1989), Boston University, calls this "high stakes" testing and says "...when the stakes are high enough, people are going to find ways to have test scores go up (p. 26)."

The Georgia assessment program will be changed, but how will the new program be different? In February, 1991, Governor Miller and State Superintendent Rogers announced a "leaner and meaner" testing program in which students will be given fewer but more difficult tests. Instead of yearly standardized tests in nine grades, only four grades will be tested in the revised program. The tests will be broader and more complex but shorter in duration. The new program will measure science, social studies, health and writing in addition to reading and mathematics. Tests will contain advanced problem solving as well as fundamental tasks. Three types of questions will be included at each of the four grade levels. There will be an essay to evaluate writing skills, a section of items from a national test, and a set of items to measure performance in relation to the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum.

The new program, while more comprehensive, will take less time to administer because sampling procedures will be used. Under sampling, different students will take various parts of the tests. This will allow the comparison of schools and districts but not individual students. Local systems will be allowed to give additional tests to measure individual performance (White,

1991).

Most Georgia educators will support the move to make the testing program broader, to measure more complex reasoning along with minimum competencies, and to have pupils spend less time in testing. However, the revisions are far short of what is needed. State leadership must lower the stakes for testing. They must encourage authentic or performace testing in relation to local curriculum goals and objectives. Staff development on the appropriate use of tests must be encouraged.

The largest problem with the Georgia Assessment Program is its use as a method to hold local educators accountable. Some testing experts believe that when this position is taken, an array of problems arise. If the consequences of testing become severe, teachers will teach to the test. Salmon-Cox (1984) found that when pressure was exerted to raise test scores in math and reading, instructional time for those subjects was taken from science and social studies. Darling-Hammond and Wise (1985) found that the precise content of the tests was taught instead of the fundamental concepts on which the tests were based. Further, instruction was in the same format as the tests. Test scores can be raised without increasing learning if teachers have students practice items that are very similar to those on the tests (Shepard, 1989). According to Carpenter (1988), students who are taught at the conceptual level obtain higher achievement scores than those who are drilled on skills. Under minimum competency testing programs, students must wait for higher level thinking skills until basic skills are in place. Lower achieving students

labor long on fundamentals and have few opportunities to work at higher levels.

McNeil (1988), reported that test-driven instruction may have the effect of pushing good teachers out of the profession and lowering the skills of those who remain. Those teachers who know much about their subject are insulted by mandates which require a focus on lower level material.

The use of test scores for accountabity is an understandable development but the practice is too simplistic. Teaching is complex. Children from diverse backgrounds interact in an evironment with many variables over which teachers have little or no control. It is a mistake to evaluate teachers using standardized scores alone. Rankings of districts is an equally ineffective practice. The demographics of school systems are diverse. The wealth of districts, for example, varies widely and family income is one of the strongest predictors of student achievement (Madaus, 1989).

Standardized tests are being asked to do more than they are capable of delivering. While it is possible to assess higher thinking skills with objective tests, the tests may not perform that task very well. To evaluate more effectively, many districts in the U.S. are exploring authentic or performance testing. "Authentic testing seeks to measure directly the student's ability to perform in the subject area; therefore they resemble real tasks as closely as possible" (Willis, 1990). If the goal is to test students ability to solve science problems, then students may be asked to conduct experiments to show

possible solutions. This is in contrast to having students respond to multiple choice items to demonstrate problem solving. Conducting a science fair project, giving an art exhibition, making a speech, writing an essay or research paper, or demonstrating how to rebuild a small engine are examples of authentic evaluation. Students must show real competence and not just an ability to recognize solutions from contrived questions. In authentic assessment, teachers examine the process of problem solving as well as answers selected. Evaluation of higher-order thinking skills is easier with performance tests. In fairness to the Georgia State Department of Education, the Georgia writing tests are performance tests and so is the current kindergarten assessment.

If student assessment in Georgia is going to improve, state leadership must encourage local educators to develop authentic assessment to use along with standardized measures. Confidence should be expressed in the ability of district personnel to define significant curriculum standards and evaluation tasks for students.

Georgia educators frequently misunderstand measurement concepts and effective testing practices. Professional development is needed to increase knowledge of types of tests, how tests are developed, and how appropriate tests are selected. Inservice is needed on test administration and the proper interpretation of results. Widespread misunderstanding exists about the nature and purpose of norm and criterion referenced tests. Scores like percentiles and grade equivalents and

concepts such as the "standard error of measurement" are frequently misunderstood. Complaints about the match between test and curriculum objectives abound. Reports of errors in test administration are numerous (Worthen & Spandel, 1991).

Some teacher preparation programs require a course in educatonal testing and measurement but many have no requirement in that regard. Leadership to increase the measurement understanding of Georgia educators and citizens could help to deminish "high stakes testing;" encourage the use of authentic testing; and increase the appropriate use of assessment in the education of Georgia students.

Many abuses in the current program resulted from the accountability policy pursued by state legislators and administrators. An attitude of mistrust directed toward local educators exists and should be replaced with one of confidence in system personnel to set and evaluate local standards. Use of a variety of measures including authentic assessments as well as State mandated tests should be encouraged. Educators and citizens need a better understanding of effective ways to evaluate the performance of students in Georgia's schools.

References

Brandt, R. (1989). On misuse of testing: a conversation with George Madaus. Educational Leadership 46: 26-29.

Carpenter, T. P., E. Fennema, P. L. Peterson, C. Chiang and M. Loef. (April, 1988). Using knowledge of children's mathematical thinking in classroom teaching. New Orleans: Paper presented to American Research Association.

Darling-Hammond, L. & A. E. Wise. Standards and school improvement. The elementary school journal 85: 315-336.

Georgia's Quality Basic Education Act. (1985). Atlanta: Georgia Department of Education.

Livingston, C., Castle, S. & Nations, J. (April, 1989). Testing and curriculum reform: One schools experience. Educational Leadership. 46 (23-25).

McNeil, L. M. (1988) Contradictions of control, part 3: contradictions of reform. Phi Delta Kappan 69, 478-485.

Shepard, L. A. Why we need better assessments. (April, 1989). EducationalLeadership. (46) 4-9.

Salmon-Cox, L. (September, 1982) "Map math: end of year report. Pittsburg: Learning Research and Development Center.

White, B. (1991). Schools plan seeks a few tough exams. Atlanta Constitution.

Worthen, Blaine R. & Spandel, Vicki. (February, 1991). Putting the standardized test debate in perspective. Educational Leadership. 48, 65-69.